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The Three Worst Presidents of the United States

By

Sheila Lynch

Senior Project

Jepson School of Leadership Studies

University of Richmond

Richmond, Virginia

May, 1998

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PREFACE

It was a Saturday in July of 1986, and my family and I had recently moved into our new home. We had only been there a few weeks, and already my mother was in a frantic rush to have the entire house decorated. July had been designated as the month to have the bedrooms painted. Hence, the two beds from my twin sisters' rooms were placed in my parent's room. My parents were in the twin's bedroom, leaving my sisters and I in their room to watch a movie.

I was ten at the time, and quite bored with the movie. Being five years older than my sisters I was always the boss. And so I suggested that we pretend that the three beds in the room were islands and the space in between them was water filled with alligators and snakes. We would each jump from one bed to the next, hoping that we would not fall in the water. What made this game even more exciting was the fact that jumping on the bed was prohibited under my mother's roof due to the danger factor. But both parents were preoccupied with painting the room that they would never hear us carrying out the mischievous deed.

And so, the excitement began. We jumped from one bed to the next, hoping not to fall into the imaginary water. Unfortunately, things got a little bit out of hand.

According to my judgement one of my sisters was going to slow. She was timid about jumping from one bed to the next. And so, I grew impatient and pushed. She fell to the floor and began to cry. I continued to jump from bed to bed, until I noticed that she wasn't embellishing the fall, but rather she was badly hurt. When I went to the ground to see what had happened, I noticed a large puddle of blood on the carpeting and a long gash up her calf. Plus, she was holding on tightly to her arm. Within a matter of minutes my parents entered the room, and then quickly had my sister on her way to the hospital. That night she returned from the hospital with sixty stitches in her leg and a cast on her broken arm.

This is not the proudest moment in my life. I was grounded for what seemed like an eternity, because most of all I disobeyed my mother's rule. While it is this life experience that many would block out, it is actually one of my most vivid childhood memories. From this experience I have learned the importance of respect for authority, obedience, and patience.

After reading this detailed saga from my life, I am sure many of my readers are wondering what any of the above has to do with leadership. I believe that it is very relevant to leadership. Just as we can learn a great deal

about ourselves through our past negative experiences, the same holds true for the concept of leadership. I thoroughly believe that while we learn a great deal from history's exceptional leaders, the leaders who have failed should also be a vital element in the study of leadership. These are the leaders from whom we learn why certain techniques and theories are useless during certain situations. We also learn what capabilities were missing from history's failed leaders, so that we can better sharpen these skills to improve our own leadership abilities.

Before going on to further explain the details of the paper, I must first explain my interests leading to my paper topic. Before, becoming a leadership major, I was fixed on the idea that leadership was government and politics. But after studying leadership for nearly four years now, I know that various types of leadership exist. Leadership is present in almost all areas of our lives. And government and politics are only a small area in which leadership can be found. I have further enhanced my leadership study here at the University of Richmond, by taking on a second major in political science. But my internship experience last summer was the only time I formally interconnected the two areas of study. Therefore,

I have chosen to take these two areas of interest and bring them together in my Jepson Senior Project.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of this paper is entitled "The Three Worst Presidents of the United States". The method that I used to complete this paper is historical analysis. I have used a variety of literature sources to make decisions concerning this project. Leadership literature was utilized to determine and support the variables to be used to select the presidents. Historical literature was used to research the chosen presidents.

As mentioned above, historical failures are very useful teaching tools. In the context of this paper, historical failures will be referred to as the major failings or corruption in which the chosen presidents were involved in during their presidential term. The principles of failure and corruption will be further explained and discussed in the variable section of this paper. I hope that the three chosen Presidents will offer further insight into both leadership and the responsibility of the presidency. I believe that this paper will help to draw the conclusion that lacking both a vision and the ability to bring about positive change directly effect a president's performance. Without both, a deficiency of motivation exists. Thereupon, the president is setting himself up for failure or involvement in corruption.

In determining the three worst Presidents of the United States, specific criteria or variables were needed in order to make accurate decisions. The variables that have been chosen are relative to the topic of leadership, therefore a clear connection between leadership abilities and political figures can be drawn. The variables that I have developed are as follows:

1. The president must have showed a lack of vision throughout his term in office.
2. The president must have displayed a lack of ability to bring about positive change throughout his term in office.
3. The president in some way must have been linked to a failure or scandal at some time during his term in office.

Before going any further in the discussions of the specific presidents chosen based on the above criteria, it is important that these variables are further explored and explained.

EXPLANATION OF VARIABLES

Vision

"The skill of being able to create a vision is the very heart of leadership."¹ A vision allows a leader, especially a president, to formally outline his values, goals, and objectives while in office. When a president takes office it should be his number one priority to do what is in the best interest of those he is leading. Hence, a vision developed early on helps to set the tone for the future term. A leadership model of a vision creates a clear and logical picture of the future, and how it can be reached. Creating a vision requires visionary leadership. According to Burt Nanus, a visionary leader should know where the organization is heading, develop a strategy, form strategic alliances, and develop resources.² Therefore, an effective President should understand the political, economic, and global contexts surrounding the nation. He should also work to develop close alliances with his citizens and other global powers. And he should have a well-established team to keep him informed as to available resources.

When developing a vision, it is essential that

¹ Matusak, Lorraine, *Finding Your Voice* (San Francisco 1997), p49

² Nanus, Burt, *Visionary Leadership* (San Francisco 1992)

Followers' needs and wants are included. An effective vision is one that is desirable by all participants. A leader with the ability to value all followers and listen to all points of view when developing a vision will face less resistance to the final plan. But lacking listening skills will surely put the group in danger of failing.³ Hence, a president should listen to the needs of all citizens regardless of age, race, gender, and income level. All citizens deserve to be heard, and their needs fulfilled.

After a vision suited to all followers' needs has been developed, this plan must be communicated to the followers. By communicating this plan to the masses, it clarifies the general direction of change, it motivates people to take action in the appropriate direction, and it helps to coordinate the actions of a diverse group of people.⁴ While a vision may not be exactly what every group wants, communication can tear down boundaries between groups by expressing the need for compromise in order to bring about the best interests of all parties involved. Openly communicating a vision helps to build a strong relationship between the leader and followers. A president that expresses what needs to be done, and how it can be

³ Matusak, Lorraine R, *Finding Your Voice* (San Francisco 1997) pp. 64-66

achieved, will gain a great deal of respect from the citizen population. It shows that the president plans to take action and wants to bring about positive change for all citizens.

Positive Change

Lacking a vision is a sign that no positive change will take place. But a leader with a carefully thought out vision is on his way to bringing about positive change.

Warren Bennis states:

A leader is, by definition, an innovator. He does things other people haven't done or don't do. He does things in advance of other people. He makes new things. He makes old things new. Having learned from the past, he lives in the present, with one eye on the future.⁵

This definition of a leader clearly expresses the importance of having the ability to bring about change. "Learning to lead is, on one level, learning to manage change."⁶

James MacGregor Burns thinks of the leader as the initiator of the change process. The initiator is the one who breaks the ice and forces people to realize change is necessary. This person must be self-confident and

⁴ Kotter, John P. *Leading Change* (Boston 1996) pp.68-69

⁵ Bennis, Warren *On Becoming A Leader* (New York 1994) p. 143

⁶ Ibid p.145

motivated in order to rally support. Conflict may arise during the change process, but rather than hindering the situation, it helps to promote collective leadership. It forces people to realize what needs and desires influence their actions. Therefore, bringing a variety of ideas to the table.⁷

Many would argue that there is nothing wrong with status quo. But this idea is disagreeable. Status quo promotes monotonous and repetitive situations. It causes people to become bored, therefore losing the drive to continue putting effort into their daily routines. Hence, with status quo comes the possibility of failure. That is why a leader's efforts to bring about change are essential. "...Unless the leader continues to evolve, to adapt, and adjust to external change, the organization will sooner or later stall."⁸ Hence, a US President is responsible for developing and implementing a change effort in order to protect our country from failure. It is the president's responsibility to take on the role as innovator and initiator.

⁷ Burns, James M. "Empowerment for Change" Sept. 1996 pp. 1-27

⁸ Bennis, Warren *On Becoming A Leader* (New York 1994) p. 145

Failure and Corruption

It is the responsibility of the president to directly represent the needs and interests of the American public.

Burns states:

Presidential power, like all political power, is a function of the leader's will to arouse and tap the needs and wants of followers and his capacity to mobilize resources to meet those needs and wants, thereby contriving to retain follower's support and to continue in power.⁹

In a sense, the president has a compact with the American public. He promises to represent their interests to the best of his ability in return for their support. He also pledges to accomplish specific objectives. These objectives should be outlined in his vision and a clearly stated plan for achieving these goals should be developed. Therefore, when the president disregards his responsibility to the American public he has failed. The public's interest is a primary force that determines whether or not a President is effective in his position. When the President disregards or violates the public interest, he is no longer living up to the expectations of his followers.

For the purpose of this paper, I have further defined failure and corruption. I consider a failure to be

considered any specific incident that clearly illustrates the president's lack of leadership. It clearly pinpoints the President's incapacity to share in the public's values and goals. It also identifies the president's inability to bring about the necessary changes that must be made in order to achieve to country's vision.

"Corruption is a behavior which deviates from the formal duties of the public role because of private regarding."¹⁰ A president is elected by the people to better the country and the government institution. Corruption takes place when a president abuses his power and the resources of the government institution. Rather than providing the public with benefits, he lets greed overtake his position causing him to make irrational decisions. And so, corruption can also be specified in a particular act or incident.

⁹ James MacGregor Burns *Leadership* (New York 1978) p. 386

¹⁰ Theobald, Robin *Corruption, Development, and Underdevelopment* (North Carolina 1990) p.2

THE CHOSEN PRESIDENTS

Nathan Miller, a Pulitzer Prize winner and author of Star-Spangled Men states, "America can survive, and make progress, even with bad presidents. But the country needs- and should have-good presidents."¹¹ While this statement is true, and in many cases, other forces or authorities rise to power when a weak president is in power, it is the president who is elected to lead and represent the American people. The American public deserves to be represented fairly and accurately. Therefore, a president should do every thing possible to develop a vision appropriate for the American people, strive to bring about positive change, and work to avoid failure and scandal. Hence, when a president lacks these abilities, their terms prove to be ineffective. Therefore, classifying them under the heading of the worst presidents in our history. Based on the criteria that I have established and explained in the previous section, Ulysses S. Grant, William Howard Taft, and Calvin Coolidge are among the three worst presidents to be chosen to lead the United States. Their lack of vision, ineffectiveness to bring about positive change, and involvement in failure or corruption are the common threads that classify these three men under this heading.

Ulysses S. Grant

President Andrew Johnson's lack of support for Reconstruction in the South eventually lead to his impeachment. "He headed the executive branch of the government; it was his job to enforce the Civil Rights Act and other laws essential to Reconstruction."¹² And get Johnson, continued to veto bills that would strengthen the Freedmen's Bureau. He did such things as replace men in the Freedmen's Bureau that favored blacks. Plus, he continued to bloc Congress' efforts to further reconstruct the South and reunite the country. For these reasons, Johnson was impeached.

His impeachment caused Americans to distrust government. They disliked the idea that political schemes were taking over the country, and inhibiting the further development of the nation. Hence, they wanted a president who was far removed from politics. They desired a man that that represented a strong sense of national pride. Therefore, they looked to Ulysses S. Grant, the recent war time hero, who had lead the fight to preserve the Union. "General Grant was the central figure in the national rejoicing and pride. The desire to do him honor was

¹¹ Miller, Nathan *Star Spangled Banner* (New York 1998) p. 18

to prove his presidential abilities. He had no need to present a vision to the country. He would be elected with or without it. Nevertheless, lacking a plan and a set of goals in which he would achieve the Radical platform would prove to be a problem in the future.

Grant took office at a time when the country was experiencing a great transition. The country had just survived a war, and although the people were unaware of it, they were in need of strong leader that would set the tone for the future. Grant had the opportunity to bring about great change, specifically in the areas outlined in the Radical platform. However, Grant did little to improve these areas.

"With the backing of the black voters in the South, Grant carried all but eight states."¹⁶ While the blacks gave Grant their support, he did very little during his two terms to better their lifestyle. Walter Allen even goes as far as suggesting that throughout Grant's presidency conditions for blacks declined.

During this time affairs in the Southern States were, as a rule, growing worse and worse. The unreasonable arrogance and oppressive extravagance of the freedman where they were in control, under the leadership of reckless carpet-baggers, and still more reckless and malicious white natives...¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid p. 108

¹⁶ Ibid p.118

¹⁷ Allen, Walter A. *Ulysses S. Grant* (New York 1901)

Grant's lack of support and unwillingness to help improve the conditions for the freed blacks can be illustrated in the following example:

...A group of black citizens from Nashville came to seek Grant's support of the proposed Fifteenth Amendment, which would enfranchise all of the nation's black men. He listened and they were encouraged, but he was noncommittal.¹⁸

Seeing that Grant's efforts during the war were aimed at freeing the slaves in the South and uniting the country, it is very surprising that Grant did not make a conscience effort to bring about positive change for the black population. Rather, he let their conditions worsen.

The other issue that Grant neglected to reform was that of civil service. While at first, Grant did make an effort to bring about civil service reform, he eventually reversed the progress he had made. During his first term Grant appointed George William Curtis as head of the board of civil service commissioners. He gave Curtis the responsibility of developing criteria and an examination that would help to increase the efficiency of the civil service. "This they did; but later on the President himself balked at the enforcement of their rules, and, in 1873, Mr. Curtis resigned."¹⁹ In March of 1875 Grant ended

¹⁸ McFeely, William S. *Grant: A Biography* (New York 1981) p. 285

¹⁹ Allen, Walter A. *Ulysses S. Grant* (New York 1901) p.128

civil service reform by stating that competitive examinations would no longer be used.²⁰

Grant further alienated from the idea of civil service reform, by placing his family members and friends in high-level government positions.

A cousin, Silas A. Hudson, an Oregon cattle trader, was made minister to Guatemala, and Reverend M.J. Cramer, a brother-in-law, became consul in Leipzig...In all, some forty relatives of either the president or first lady were scattered about the government or earned large fees from influence peddling.²¹

It was these friends and family members appointed to positions, that caused Grant to become involved in corrupt dealings. By the end of his second term, Grant had been involved in or associated with at least three corrupt acts that took place under his leadership. These scandals are the gold conspiracy, the Santo Domingo affair, and the Whiskey Ring scandal.

Jay Gould and Jim Fisk, both a part of Grant's cabinet, were behind the gold scandal. They tricked Grant into believing that higher gold prices would be good for farming exports. Therefore, when Grant convinced the Treasury to stop selling gold to stabilize the price, Gould and Fisk bought a large amount of gold and eventually made a fortune by selling at the higher prices. While Grant can

²⁰ Carpenter, John A. *Ulysses S. Grant* (New York 1970) p. 120

not be directly blamed, his decision caused the gold price to raise from \$135 to \$163.5, throwing Wall Street into a panic and causing the nation's commerce stability to be at risk. Gould and Fisk's dealings caused the nation financial problems, making Grant appear as if he had little knowledge of the government's financial system.²²

In another situation, Grant's personal secretary Babcock and other close friends including Rawlins and Butler, convinced the president to annex Santa Domingo. In doing so, Grant could establish a naval base and an area of settlement for the freed black men. Meanwhile, his friends supported the annexation knowing that they would get rich from the deal. And so, Grant sent it to the Senate for approval. But the deal was not approved due to suspicions. "Intellectuals and polished gentlemen [of the Senate] would not listen to his reasons for wanting to annex Santo Domingo and instead, insisted on connecting disreputable men to the deal."²³ Meanwhile, Babcock was feeding Senator Sumner information on the corruption of the deal. Therefore, removing himself from the situation, and only

²¹ Miller, Nathan *Star-Spangled Men* (New York 1998) p. 119

²² Ibid p. 122

²³ McFeely, William S. *Grant: A Biography* (New York 1981) p.344

making Grant look worse. This was a public humiliation for Grant.²⁴

But the corruption did not stop. The Whiskey Ring scandal was another corrupt act that many of Grant's men, including Babcock, were in on.

The methods of the whiskey rings, although by no means uniform, usually consisted in false reports to the government of the amount of spirits manufactured or rectified.²⁵

Therefore, the whiskey manufacturers paid lower liquor taxes. But the corruption did not stop with the manufacturers. Members of the Treasury Department accepted money in return for covering up the false reports made by the manufacturers.²⁶ Men of Grant's administration were involved at both ends of the deal, and were making large profits. And, while Grant was fully aware of Babcock's involvement, he did everything in his power to see that his friend would escape conviction.²⁷

While Grant was not directly tied to all of the above corruption, he was associated with them. These corrupt acts eliminate Grant's weaknesses as a leader. Rather than surrounding himself with competent men, Grant appointed his friends and family to high-level government positions.

²⁴ Ibid p.344

²⁵ Hesselstine, William B. Ulysses S. Grant (New York 1935) p. 378

²⁶ Ibid p. 378

While, these scandals began early in Grant's first term, they did not stop, and continued throughout his second term. Being in a highly powerful position, Grant could have made a variety of changes in order to end the corruption. He could have directed his administrators' efforts towards making improvements for the American people, especially the black population. But instead, Grant allowed these scandals to continue, and he too became entangled in the corruption.

William Howard Taft

Prior to Taft's presidency, Theodore Roosevelt held the executive power. Roosevelt's presidency symbolized great change in both the presidential position and the country. Roosevelt stated:

...Under this interpretation of executive power I did and caused to be done many things not previously done by the President and the heads of the department. I did not usurp power, but I did greatly broaden the use of executive power.²⁸

Rather than allowing Congress to hold a tight reign on governmental power, he made every effort to bring about change using his executive powers. He believed that congressional seats represented only sections of the country, whereas, the presidency stood for the American

²⁷ Miller, Nathan *Sin-Spangled Men* (New York 1998) p. 127

²⁸ Coletta, Paolo E. *The Presidency of William Howard Taft* (New York 1973) p. 12

people as a whole. Hence, Roosevelt became known as the man with the "big stick" and promised a "square deal". His presidency represented the beginning of a progressive era. It was marked by an end to government corruption and opened the doors to clean government and direct democracy.²⁹

Hence, what more could a successor want. Taft had everything handed directly to him. He entered the presidency as the leader of the Republican Party, which controlled the White House and was the majority in Congress. With this advantage, and overwhelming public support, many would think that Taft would have easily kept the momentum for change going. While Roosevelt took great strides, many problems still existed. "Taft assumed office at a time when many such problems, old and new, were demanding solutions, but he was incapable of moving toward the necessary changes."³⁰ With the progressive era still going strong, Taft could have brought about reform in the areas of labor, capital, currency, trusts, railroad regulation, tariffs, and income tax.³¹ But the momentum to bring about change stopped with Taft.

Taft's problems began to develop during his campaign. Taft had been chosen by Roosevelt to be his successor. He

²⁹ Miller, Nathan *Star Spangled Men* (New York 1998) p.48

³⁰ Scholes, Marie & Scholes, Walter *The Foreign Policies of the Taft Administration* (Missouri 1970) p. 4

³¹ Coletta, Paolo E. *The Presidency of William Howard Taft* (New York 1973) p.10-11

chose Taft not because of his strong ideas, but because of the strong support Taft gave to Roosevelt during his own presidency. Roosevelt was looking for a man that would continue to carry out his mission of progressive reform. Throughout Roosevelt's term in office, Taft had proven to be a faithful follower and supporter of Roosevelt while he served as the Secretary of War.

Inasmuch as Taft had been a yes-man, never deviating from the views of his leader, Roosevelt may have believed that Taft would be easy to control, and thus he would be able to retain his authority after departing the White House. As a result, he convinced himself - and the country - that Taft was cut from the same progressive cloth as himself.³²

Hence, Taft was chosen to further carry out the vision of Roosevelt.

President Roosevelt was considered the strongest member of the Republican Party and possibly the strongest United States political figure at the time.³³ And since he was greatly respected by the American public, Roosevelt's choice to back Taft gave Taft an immediate lead. In Taft's support, Roosevelt wrote:

Taft will carry on the work substantially as I have carried it on. His policies, principles, purposes, and ideals are the same as mine...In leaving I have profound satisfaction of knowing that he will do all in his power to further everyone of the great causes for which I have fought and that he will persevere in

³² Miller, Nathan *The Star Spangled Banner* (New York 1998) p. 49

³³ Duffy, Herbert S. *William Howard Taft* (New York 1930) p. 201

every one of the great governmental policies in which I most firmly believe.³⁴

While Roosevelt and the American public believed Taft would continue to carry out progressive changes, Taft's views were much more conservative. He was being asked to carry on both a position and a vision he did not believe in. Taft's interests lied in the judicial branch rather than the executive. He was a well-trained lawyer, and would have preferred an appointment the Supreme Court. But pressure from his family and Roosevelt, forced him into campaigning for the presidency based on the beliefs of Roosevelt.

...Despite the fact that he had gone along with Roosevelt's reforms, Taft remained a conservative. He revered the law and the judicial process, he respected the past and its institutions; he disliked change, especially if the impetus came from below.³⁵

Taft's campaign was based on the vision of someone else. Therefore, he had little motivation to campaign and rarely reached out to the American public. "He hoped that it would not be necessary to stump the country, and that it would be possible for him to remain in Cincinnati, where he could receive the many delegations that were expected to

³⁴ Coletta, Paolo E *The Presidency of William Howard Taft* (New York 1973) p. 9

³⁵ Scholes, Marie & Scholes, Walter *The Foreign Policies of Taft* (Missouri 1970) p. 4

call upon him."³⁶ And when he did give campaign speeches they rarely illustrated to the country the specific things that he hoped to accomplish while in office. Rather they were similar to the following excerpt from a speech he made in 1907 during the campaign:

Is it possible that a man shows lack of originality, shows slavish imitation, because he happens to concur in the views of another who has the power to enforce those views: Mr. Roosevelt's views were mine long before I knew Mr. Roosevelt at all.³⁷

Lacking the ability to offer the American public a picture of the future and his strategy for reaching those future goals proves that he was not motivated by Roosevelt's ideals. Hence, his inability to express his own, true ideals, goals, and vision caused problems for Taft during his presidency when he tried to make changes.

As mentioned earlier, Taft's conservative views were hidden behind a progressive platform throughout the campaign. And so, when Taft tried to bring about positive change based on his conservative ideals, he came into conflict with Congress. The Payne-Aldrich Tariff situation exemplifies this point.

The 1908 Republican platform had promised tariff revision. This issue proved to be a problem for Taft. The Republican Party split on this issue. Conservatives

³⁶ Duffy, Herbert S. *William Howard Taft* (New York 1930) p. 213

supported high tariffs, while progressives believed that high tariffs increased the power of the trusts. Therefore, Taft would have to choose a side to support. "...It was determined that seventy Americans ...each owned one-sixteenth of the total wealth of the nation."³⁸ And many believed that this was due to the development of trusts. Hence, Roosevelt had pledged to work towards ending trusts and helping to improve the lives of the majority of Americans at the bottom end of the economic scale. And so it would seem that Taft would follow in his predecessor's footsteps and side with the progressives. But when Taft needed to make a decision, he chose to side with the conservatives.

When the bill left the House, reduced tariffs had been unanimously agreed upon. But on the Senate side, 847 changes from the House's version of the bill were made. These changes would increase certain tariffs not included in the House bill. The progressives of the House believed that Taft was on their side, and therefore thought he would veto the bill in their favor. But this was not the case. Taft chose to follow his own ideals, and signed the bill.

While Taft followed his instincts, signing the bill proved to be a bad decision that brought about negative reactions and changes. First, it further divided the

³⁷ Coletta, Paolo *The Presidency of William Howard Taft* (New York 1973) p. 8

Republican Party, weakening its legitimate power throughout the country. This would prove to be a great problem in the next presidential election. Secondly, it dissatisfied a large portion of the American public because many believed that the tariff rates still remained too high. They felt that these high rates hurt the customers, and favored big businesses. And so, the progressives of Congress took this opportunity to rally support from the public. "The [progressives] in Congress, reflecting the sentiment of the states west of the Mississippi River, beginning with Minnesota and running down Kansas, denounced Taft for not breaking with the conservative element of his party..."³⁹

This specific example of Taft's inability to bring about positive change for the majority of the American public, combined with other wrong decisions that he made in office, lead to a great failure. Throughout Taft's term, his conservative views became more and more evident. Rather than carrying on Roosevelt's vision, he chose to side with the conservatives of the Republican Party. This greatly angered Roosevelt, forcing him to announce his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination. While he campaigned throughout the country, he had little chance of receiving the nomination. The conservatives

³⁸ Ibid p.21

controlled the party, and sure enough nominated Taft as the republican candidate. Therefore, the Progressive Party was established in support of Roosevelt's candidacy.

The Democratic Party nominated Woodrow Wilson, a progressive governor from New Jersey. As the elections drew closer, it was clear that it was a two-man race between Roosevelt and Wilson. But, the Democrats took over the White House. Roosevelt and Taft split the republican votes, while Wilson won 42% of the votes. Taft finished last, barely carrying the support of two states. But worst of all, the Republican party lost control of the White House for the first time in sixteen years. This was a great failure for the Republican Party.⁴⁰

In conclusion, the loss of the White House can be blamed on Taft. If Taft had explained his conservative views to Roosevelt, it is very possible that a better progressive candidate could have been chosen. But instead, Taft did not stand up for his own views; rather he led the American public to believe that he would carry out Roosevelt's mission. He lacked his own vision and explanation of what he wanted to accomplish in the future. Therefore, the decisions he made while in office were very alarming to the American public. The public was very

³⁹ Duffy, Herbert S. *William Howard Taft* (New York 1930) p. 239

dissatisfied with the changes he made. Therefore, causing the great split in the Republican Party, leading to the parties defeat in the presidential election. After sixteen years the American public elected a democrat to the White House. This shift signifies the public's great disappointment in Taft's executive leadership abilities.

Calvin Coolidge

As vice president, Coolidge came to power on August 3, 1923 as a result of President Harding death. He finished out Harding's term and then ran in the presidential election of 1924, in which he won. Coolidge seemed to be the ideal person needed to take office after Harding. The American people thought he was exactly what the country needed. The Harding Administration was characterized by scandals, which were eventually revealed to the public. "...all malefactors were indicted. Fall, Miller, and Sinclair were sent to prison. Daugherty escaped by a twice-hung jury, and three others, Jess Smith, John T. King, and Charles F. Cramer, had committed suicide."⁴¹ The men mentioned above were all members of Harding's administration that were involved in the Teapot Dome and California Naval Oil Reserve scandals.

⁴⁰ Miller, Nathan *The Star-Spangled Men* (New York 1998) pp.63-65

⁴¹ Hoover, Herbert *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover 1920-1933* (New York 1952) p. 54

Hence, the American public was very wary of the federal government.

But, Coolidge was different from Harding. He was a man with a calm aura and a true sense of honesty. Honesty was a key component that led to his election. After experiencing Harding's corrupt administration, the American public wanted a man they could trust. "In the midst of political cynicism and spiritual doubts, he signified old-fashioned piety."⁴² Coolidge was a conservative, and was very cautious about making changes. He disliked change, and his presidency would further reveal this nature. Coolidge's presidency was characterized by a lack of intervention and involvement. At the time, that was what the people seemed to have wanted. It was the Roaring Twenties, and the country was experiencing great prosperity. The American public did not want Coolidge to make any changes that could negatively effect these times of affluence. Shortly after being elected to the presidency Coolidge stated, "I don't anticipate to change very much...The country does not appear to require radical departures from the policies already adopted as much as it needs a further extension of those policies."⁴³ And so

⁴² Miller, Nathan *Star Spangled Banner* (New York 1998) p.90

⁴³ Ibid p.102

Coolidge did exactly that, he sat back and watched the country prosper. He was content with the status quo.

But, as explained earlier, along with status quo comes the possibility of failure. While Coolidge sat back and enjoyed the phrase "Coolidge prosperity," he failed to recognize the warning signs of failure. As time went on the country's prosperity became disproportional, and failed to reach millions of Americans. It seemed that the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer.

Farm prices had never recovered from a recession that followed World War I. Radiant statistics about wage growth, rising industrial production, and employment cloaked the fact that distribution of income was growing progressively worse each year. Nearly half of America's families made only \$1,500 or less annually, even though government statistics said a family of four required \$2,500 a year to maintain a 'decent' standard of living.⁴⁴

To make problems worse, the few policy reforms that Coolidge did make seemed to widen the gap between the upper and lower class. He cut taxes on the country's highest incomes in half, and inheritance and gift taxes were abolished. Meanwhile, he only reduced taxes on income levels below \$4000 by 1%. Plus he enforced high tariffs that seemed to hurt the consumer.⁴⁵ This all gave way to an

⁴⁴ Ibid p. 88

⁴⁵ Ibid p.103

over abundance of goods being produced, and very few goods being consumed.

These problems could have been avoided if Coolidge had communicated with the public. As we learned earlier, a leader's communication skills are essential in order to determine the needs of the public. Coolidge kept to himself and rarely spoke with the public. At this time in history, the press was a politician's main source of communication with the people. But, Coolidge often ignored and refused to give the press any information. He replied to most questions of the press with a quick "yes" or "no".⁴⁶ He rarely gave any details as to his plans and goals. Hence, the public knew little of what he was thinking and what actions he was taking to better the country. If Coolidge had made more of an effort to develop and explain his objectives to the public, they could have responded with feedback. Thereby, establishing a two-way line communication.

But, he very seldom wanted to hear from those Americans that wanted to communicate their needs and ideas to him. Before leaving the White House, he gave Hoover advice on how to deal with visitors. "You have to stand every day three or four hours of visitors...if you keep dead

still they will run down in three or four minutes. If you even cough or smile they will start up all over again."⁴⁷ This clearly shows Coolidge's lack of concern he had for Americans needs. Lacking communication skills possible prohibited Coolidge from knowing and understanding the American public. If he had taken the time to meet and associate with the public it is very possible that sufferings of those explained above could have been avoided.

Without an understanding of the Americans needs, Coolidge refused to think about change. He believed that trouble could be dealt with when it actual hit. One of his famous sayings was:

If you see ten troubles coming down the road, you can be sure that nine will run into the ditch before they reach you and you have to battle with only one of them.⁴⁸

This may have seemed to be the perfect philosophy while the nation prospered. But this philosophy allowed Coolidge, to foresee any possible problems that were brewing because the economy was still doing so well. But there were visible signs that this prosperity would soon run dry. A variety of industries, including farming,

⁴⁶ Ibid p. 91

⁴⁷ Hoover, Herbert *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover* (New York 1952) p. 55

⁴⁸ Ibid p. 55

mining, and textiles were faced with stunted growth. And meanwhile, unemployment was on the rise, productions of goods were falling, and fewer Americans were purchasing goods.⁴⁹

Coolidge chose not to run for reelection in 1928. Instead he left the White House while the good times still existed. Therefore, leaving the problems he had created through his lack of activity to Herbert Hoover. Six months after leaving Washington DC, the Stock Market crashed, and our nation fell into the Great Depression. If Coolidge had pledged to help raise farm prices, end the large income gap that existed, reduce tariffs, and raise taxes on the wealthy rather than the poor, the freeze on the economy could have been avoided. Thereby, reducing the risk of a Great Depression. Instead, banks collapsed, factories shutdown, and the American people lost their jobs and savings. The prosperity that our nation had experienced for much of the 1920's had come crashing down within a matter of days. But this problem was developing throughout the course of Coolidge's presidency. It was as if his philosophy had caught up with him. "...When the tenth trouble reached him he was wholly unprepared, and it had by that time acquired such momentum that it spelled

⁴⁹ Miller, Nathan *Star Spangled Men* (New York 1998) p. 106

disaster."⁵⁰ Fortunately for Coolidge, he was no longer in office when the country came crashing down. It may have been his fault, but it was no longer his responsibility. He left Hoover, his successor, with a mess that would not be cured overnight.

This failure that our country faced after Coolidge left office can be blamed on his lack of ability to communicate with the American people. If he had communicated with those in the farming, mining, and textile industries, those suffering from low wages, and those being hurt by high tariffs, he could have put a stop to the eventual problem. But lacking initiative to develop a vision for change, the problems manifested. Coolidge rather than promoting change through policy reform, sat back enjoyed the prosperity of the '20's. Mentioned earlier, Bennis stated that a leader should use the past as a reference, live the present, and always keep an eye on the future. Coolidge never looked past the present, therefore neglecting the future.

Coolidge's presidency was characterized by rapid growth and prosperity. But his inability to take action, is the primary reason he can be considered a failure. Lacking the ability to develop a vision that represented

the needs of the public, he was unable to bring about positive change for the country. And this lack of responsibility on Coolidge's part ultimately led to the country's great failure known as the Great Depression. The Great Depression was a failure that developed because of Coolidge's inability to carry out his leadership position.

⁵⁰ Hoover, Herbert *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover 1920-1933* (New York 1952) p. 56

CONCLUSION

This paper has made an attempt to identify the three worst presidents of the United States. In doing so, this research will benefit the further study of leadership. Historical leaders are important in the study of leadership. Not only can leadership scholars reflect upon their leadership styles, but they can also analyze the outcome of the situation. By doing this scholars learn where and when certain leadership styles and techniques are effective. While positive historical results are useful, negative outcomes also teach leadership scholars great lessons. Hence, this paper teaches us a great deal concerning political leadership. Grant, Taft, and Coolidge stand as prime examples of poor and ineffective leaders.

With Grant we see that his inability to focus on bringing about change to a nation in transition, led him to lose sight of the needs of the American public. Rather than engaging his administration in a vision that foresaw changes for the black population and the area of civil service, he and his staff became involved in an array of scandals.

Taft's incapability to express his own conservative views to the American public during his

campaign proved to be his greatest downfall. This was fully illustrated when Taft sided with the Conservative Republicans in the Payne-Aldrich Tariff situation. His inability to continue the progressive movement caused the Republican Party to split, leading to the eventual fall of the party in the executive branch.

Coolidge's lack of communication with the American people and his unresponsiveness to the tumbling economy caused future problems. Coolidge did not deal with the low farm prices, the large income gap, the high tariffs, and the tax issue. Hence, these problems proceeded to grow in a downward spiral. His lack of motivation led to the eventual outbreak of the Great Depression.

In conclusion, these three presidents all share a common bond. They each lacked a vision, were unable to bring about positive change, and became involved in corruption and failure. Hence, we learn through this study that a leader's involvement in corruption and failure is a result of their inability to carry out a vision and positive change. By studying the three worst presidents of the United States, we learn an important lesson. The lesson learned can simply be

stated, vision and change are essential aspects of leadership.

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